



Le Nouveau Godard: An Exploration of "Sauve qui peut (la vie)"

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Le Nouveau Godard

an exploration of **Sauve qui peut (la vie)**

"We live in curious times and amid astonishing contrasts: reason on the one hand, the most absurd fanaticism on the other . . . a civil war in every soul. Sauve qui peut!" —Voltaire¹

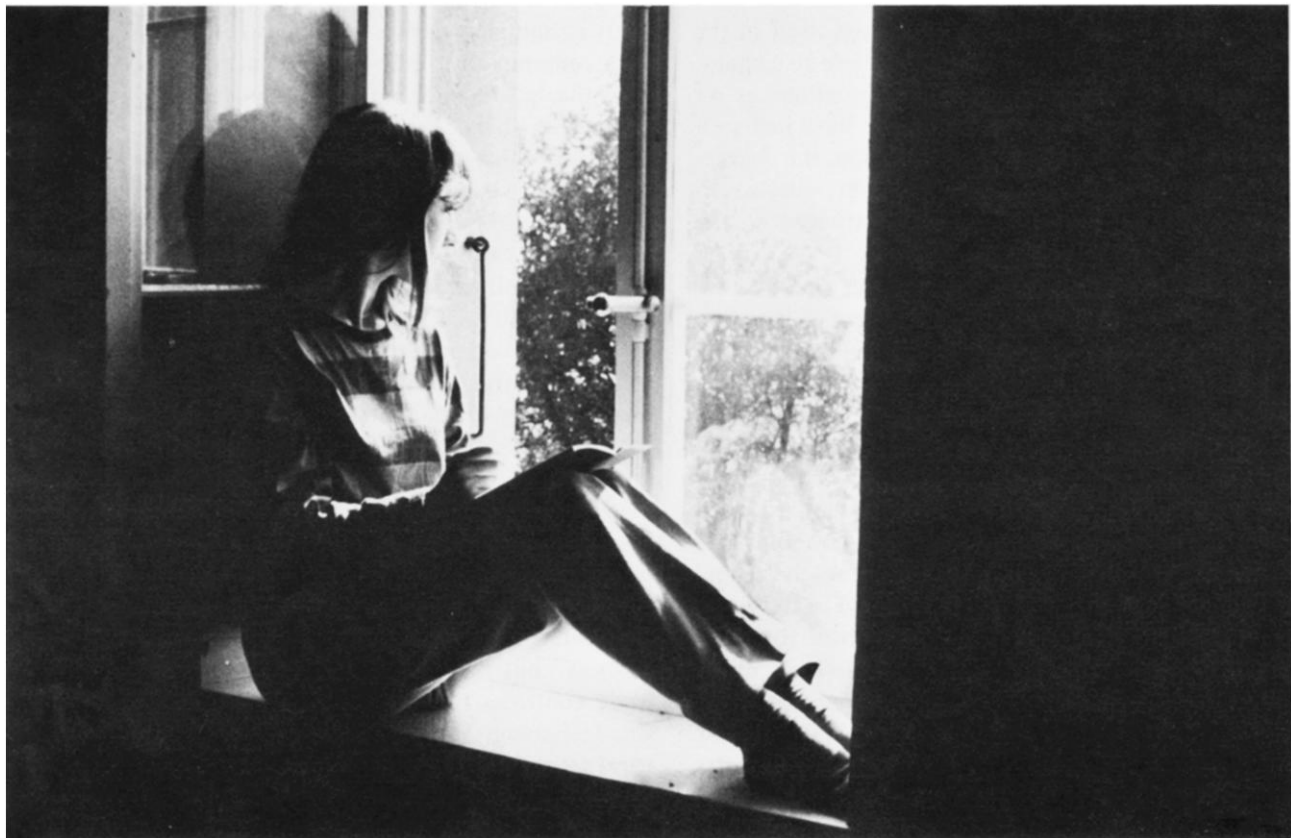
Jean-Luc Godard's *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* has yet to receive an adequate reading. Grateful for his re-appearance, the critics praised the film at Cannes for its beauty and its humor. Although baffled by its intricacies, they favored the film and welcomed Godard's return to the theatrical screens.

The film is baffling. It is also intricate. It is not what it appears. It dissembles, as if to please us. Like previous films by Godard, *Sauve*

qui peut consists of a multiplicity of texts, all hidden within the pretense of a narrative which is, on examination, no narrative at all.

The film is a triptych in five parts. This irrational assertion might be helpful in dealing with the form of the film. It is a portrait of three people presented in five separate sections. One could be less paradoxical by describing the film as a three-part structure framed by a two-part preface and then a coda. Yet paradox is central to the mind of Jean-Luc Godard.

One must return to zero, Godard was saying (echoing Roland Barthes) at the time of *Le gai savoir*, in order to think things through. On a



playful level, *Sauve qui peut* goes further. Over the first part of the title—*Sauve qui peut*—which occurs about one minute after the beginning of the film, Godard superimposes a minus one. A few seconds further on, over the second part of the title—*la vie*—Godard superimposes a zero. This equation of life with zero might seem to be the ultimate moral of this film; at the same time, it is also the point from which begins the film's investigations.

Sauve qui peut (la vie) abounds in contrasts—contrasts that (arguably) are never satisfactorily reconciled. Such narrative as the film contains resolves nothing. If the film begins in the clouds, it ends on an empty city space. The filmic text remains open. Or it returns to zero. We have to work at potential readings of this film.

But throughout this film, the city contrasts with landscape, civilization with nature, the actual with the potential, social life with the inner life of dreams, darkness with light, “reality” with art. And if civilization has been rendered inhuman by the omnipotence of banks—“Only banks are independent,” Isabelle is forced to recite—the Swiss landscape is framed in such a way that it often appears artificially beautiful, as if redesigned by civilization and then reframed by Godard. For if contrasts are established, transformations of these contrasts also occur. Meaning is suggested and then snatched away. The film destroys itself in the process of its own creation, only to rise again, phoenix-like, in our own imaginations as we attempt to reconstruct what we have just seen destroyed. If, throughout this film, the characters move from darkness into light, when wrestling with its details we must strive to do the same.

In relation to Godard's earlier work, *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* is not so different as it seems. The bright yellows, reds, and blues that, with a poster-like boldness, accentuated the conflict of values in films like *Pierrot le fou* and *Deux ou trois choses*, are still present in this film, though they are less in the foreground. Near the beginning of the film as Paul Godard in his blue jacket approaches his blue car (pursued by the Italian gay who so wants Paul to “ream” him), there is a yellow car parked in the right-hand corner of the screen. Denise Rimbaud scribbles down her thoughts (which might become a novel) in a blue-covered notebook; and Isabelle, in her red Fiat, is pursued by the pimps in a grey-blue Mercedes. Finally, after

Paul's accident (is he struck by the same grey-blue Mercedes that had formerly pursued Isabelle?), in the last shot of the film as Cecile, Paul's daughter, and Colette, Paul's estranged wife, move through a dark alley towards the light in the boulevard that we see through the arch at the end, a yellow car is parked for a time on the right-hand side of the arch while, to the left, there is a rectangular smear of red painted on a wall. While these colors may not be “meaningful” (in that it would be difficult to name a single signified), their presence activates memory and the consistency of their use adds a suggestion of rhyme to the form of the film.

Similarly, if Godard's earlier work was characterized by a disjunctive relationship between images and sounds, so in *Sauve qui peut* (though again, not so boldly) once more these disjunctions occur. Designed at times as if to ape the clever over-lapping of sound and image that characterizes the “seamless suture” of conventional narrative editing, Godard's use of this device has, on analysis, the opposite effect. In that early sequence already mentioned, as Paul drives away from the Italian gay who is after him, we cut to the first shots of Denise on her bicycle in the country. “Evil city!” we hear the gay cry out over these shots of rural escape, before the sounds of sheep-bells and birds accompany Denise on her way, and the first, contemplative step-printing occurs.

Similarly, at a later moment Denise is cycling off to find Michel Piaget (her friend from the past) and swish-sounds are heard as she turns into a field—sounds which at this moment might seem like the sounds of jets. When the next scene is established, however, we recognize these sounds as part of the game of Hornuss—a traditional Swiss game that looks like a mixture of Lacrosse and fishing!

Most effective, perhaps, is the moment when Paul is taking his daughter on her birthday to have dinner with her mother. After he parks his car, the camera follows the two of them left along a most distended Esso service station, over which Cecile's story about blackbirds begins. I will say more about this story in a minute; but right now, the important point about all these overlappings is not their “seamlessness” but the fact that they reinforce the basic contrasts in the film: city vs. country; war technology vs. the competitive sounds of rural sport; industry vs. nature.

Sometimes, in fact, these sonic links disrupt our sense of time as well. When Paul, with Cecile, is meeting Denise at the studio, Denise appears behind the automatic glass panels of the doors. In the only tender embrace that we see between them in the film, they greet one another with apparently great affection. This greeting is further heightened by the effect of step-printing, a device that in this film con-



sistently signals a moment of increased awareness and of personal contemplation. As their arms encircle one another and the television doors behind them judder to a close, their voice-over dialogue seems to come from a previous time. "Will you help me?" she asks. "I'll help you," he replies. "Will you love me much longer?" she again requests. "Longer than you think," he again replies.

Yet this feeling of flashback (from both the physical tenderness and the future potential implicit in this dialogue) is undercut by the narrative overlay which Godard has provided for this film. We see the grumpy Cecile in the car, waiting to drive off to have dinner with her mother; and after the step-printing, the scene immediately degenerates into an abusive row. As if this temporal confusion were not enough, when Paul drives off with Cecile, leaving Denise in comparative darkness with the bright glow of the setting sun shining through the trees behind her, he cries out again, as if indeed to "suture" these two filmic moments: "Longer than you think!"

However, these moments *cannot* coalesce. Affectively from different periods of time, they seem linked by the linear narrative that claims

to hold this film together. And yet it doesn't. Once again, as previously in Godard, any easy assimilation on the part of the spectator is blocked by this "irrational" concatenation of events.

As in all films by Godard, in *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* the simplest details possess potential meaning. After the slow travelling left over a sky filled with clouds that opens this film, Godard cuts to Paul in his huge Swiss hotel room, trying to phone Denise. A woman is singing opera, apparently in the next room—at least Paul is able to silence her by banging on the wall.

This first scene is a sequence shot. To the left of the screen, there is the white lamp of his bedroom; behind Paul, but still to the left, is



the bright light of a window; while to the right, there appears to be another bright window. Only after Paul has failed to get through to Denise and has walked forward towards the camera and out of the frame can we recognize that this second window is a mirror, a mere reflection of the first. Throughout his life as a film-maker, Godard has always contested the more naturalized forms of illusionist practice. Through this window/mirror confusion, Godard shows us that he is still working in much the same way. Even in this film, on the surface so conventional, our eyes cannot passively assume that what we see on the screen is what it appears to be.

Out in the darkened corridor (down an extended escalator which runs from the mezzanine to the street, the operatic voice begins

again. It is apparently diegetic. There is a huge woman in these scenes whom people keep staring at as if she were the one who is singing. At the same time (and we would need keen eyes to be sure of this), her lips don't appear to be moving. Is the music coming from her or is it not? Once again, the irrational confusion of image and sound refuses an answer.

These opening scenes followed by the negative implications of the title, with a minus one moving towards a zero, seem resonant of more potential significance than, at this stage, can easily be named. The grand hotel is the epitome of capitalistic, consumerist activity. Its architecture more suggests the ever-transient impressiveness of an international airport than a space within which one might choose to dwell. It is less than nothing (minus one). Its values are inverted (the beseeching gay). Nevertheless, it has music (grand opera), an effect that, while parodying the ubiquitous Musak, might suggest that certain forms of expensive art (opera, the cinema) now need such a monied environment in order to survive.

When Denise appears, so do the first examples of Godard's step-printing. But even here, the relationship between sound and image is a denaturalizing one. When Denise is arrested in her movement, a sort of jazzy, cocktail-bar motif is heard on the sound track—a theme more appropriate to the grand hotel, one might imagine, than to the stunningly beautiful Swiss countryside. It is only at the end of this moment, when she finally regains her "natural" movement, that she is lent support by the use of "natural" sounds; and it is when we hear the sound of her bicycle plus the chirping of birds that the second part of the title—*la vie*—appears, with its superimposed zero. Given the complex context created for this part of the title—meditative freeze-frames intermingled with natural movement, spatially dislocated music alternating with natural sounds—this zero might imply the tension between artifice and nature from which any creativity must begin.

This suggestion is reinforced by the sequence which follows the title. The "ethereal" theme (as we might call it) that opens the film is heard again as we track along a lake front, visually exploring a beautiful Swiss landscape. Yet, as elsewhere in the film, it is a landscape without a subject, without a character to establish a point of view. Then we pick up Denise

again, cycling up a mountain road (with a moment of natural sound as some other cyclists pass her), until finally, we see her in a restaurant opening up her blue notebook in which she plans to jot down those thoughts that might become a novel.

At first, some off-screen male voices are heard; and later, we cut to some women at another table talking about family problems, accidents, and scandals. It is in the middle of this scene, however, that the first of the diegetic references to music occurs. "What's that music?" Denise asks the waitress who is too absorbed by the demands of her work to hear anything at all. This question which is shared by other women in the film has generally been accepted as a joke, as a kind of Buñuelian intradiegetic reference to the background music.² While on one level it *is* that, like everything else in the film it is something more as well.

First of all, only the women in the film are privileged to hear it. Denise hears it, (I believe) Isabelle hears it, certainly the dark-haired hooker hears it, even though she only appears in two scenes in the film. So it has something to do with being female and, as later details will suggest, it has something to do with the imagination. Both Denise and Isabelle have interior monologues. With Denise, these monologues supposedly relate to her writing; with Isabelle, they relate to imagined relationships that are different from her monotonous trade as a call-girl. When we link these facts to some of the ideas shared with us by Marguerite Duras during her off-screen reading from *Le Camion* in this film, some interpretations begin to emerge.

The Duras monologue is long and complex. It is chiefly about writing and more specifically about women writing. In this way, in macro-fashion, it refers to the whole problem of creation shared by the two Godards in the film—Paul Godard, the character, and Jean-Luc Godard, the film-maker; and in another way, in micro-fashion, it anticipates Cecile's essay about blackbirds with *her* specific problems of creation which occurs later in the film.

The Duras monologue ends with a discussion of creative territory. "If there is a domain for women," we hear her say, "if there's such a place, I think it's full of childhood, much more childhood than is in man's domain. Men are more childlike than women, but they have less

childhood.” One way of understanding these oblique remarks is to relate them further to the two intertitles that introduce respectively both Denise’s and Paul’s sections of the film: women, Duras/Godard seems to be saying, have more Imagination and less Fear.

Like so many of Godard’s previous films, *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* examines absences—the absence of passion, the absence of family, the absence of love. It also explores incapacities and, on the surface, might seem to endorse futilities. Like *Numéro Deux* before it and like *Le Mépris* before that, *Sauve qui peut* is an intricately created statement about the inability to create. But it is not like *8 1/2* or *All That Jazz*. Its rhetoric is too painful, its tone too subdued, its conclusions too tentative. It is in every sense of the word a desperate film, but on reflection, I do not find it nihilistic. In spite of the possible nihilism of the characters, the intricacy of its form affirms.

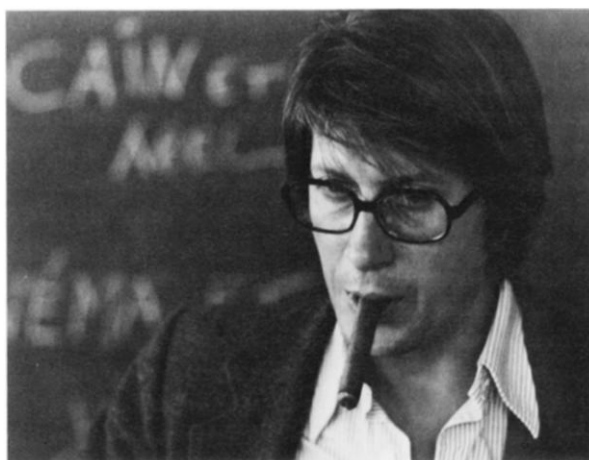
If, unlike Paul, Denise has more imagination and less fear, it is partly that as a woman she has more access to childhood (as Duras has explained) and partly, in terms of the narrative of this film, that she has the determination to leave the darkness of the city for the light of the country. As she talks about her writing, she is trying to determine the meaning of life. Life, she explains to herself, is “a gesture made at a faster pace, an arm which moves off-beat, a step taken slower . . .” This voice-over monologue occurs over a number of different scenes as she talks to Michel about a more “professional” series of articles that she would like to write for him. However, at one point in this sequence, while we see the mechanical arms of Michel’s printing press flapping about in the foreground, Denise concludes her monologue by describing life as “that thing in everyone which silently screams out: I am not a machine.”

This sequence comes to an end as both Denise and Michel move outside the printing shop. She is talking about her salary for the “paid” work that she hopes to do. The camera leaves her for a moment and follows the dark-haired hooker as she walks past a cow in a field and then Denise cycles past her. “Paid” work of any kind within the contemporary world would seem to involve for Godard a measure of prostitution.

The voice-over scraps from Denise’s note-



Jean-Luc Godard, above;
“Paul Godard,” below.



book all have to do with the affirmation of life through language. Yet there are ironies here. Not only do these affirmations contrast with some of Duras’s comments about the “dubious” nature of writing, about “the silence that surrounds the text,” but they also contrast with what she herself says to Paul while they are sitting in a bar together. “I want to do things,” she explains, “not just name them.” Yet all we see her *do* is cycle about the countryside, looking at people and (through step-printing) sometimes looking at us. Except when she is talking, she seems more an observer than a participant.

Nevertheless, she is trying to move forward, out and away, even if she doesn’t know where she is going. For the last shot we see of her, once again on her bicycle, there is no step-printing. It is as if she has been set free.

This sense of freedom contrasts with Paul’s feeling of increasing entrapment. He complains about the lack of a rear-view mirror in his car. He wants to move backwards. Since he is driven on more by fear than by his imagination, he cannot bring himself to leave that air-

conditioned nightmare of a hotel where he is constantly waited upon (we see a chambermaid either bringing him food or taking it away); and even though he and Colette have nothing to say to one another, he wants to see her more often, as if to hang on to an unproductive dependency. In the last shots we see of him after his accident, *all* of them with step-printing, he is touching his own forehead while lying in the street, as if to reassure himself (like Juliette at the end of *Deux ou trois choses*) that he is not yet dead.

While Denise's monologues provide an ongoing discourse about the relationship of words to life, Isabelle's monologues are developed more sequentially. Each one occurs while she is acting out some sexual fantasy for somebody else and each attempts to explore, through her imagination, an alternate life style.

The first monologue occurs while she is in bed with Paul, "faking" her orgasm. It is a family fantasy. She imagines herself as a housewife, tidying up her home throughout the day, in order to make her family realize their dependence on her. "Even in dreams," as Paul says the next morning (after the third intertitle, "Commerce," which relates to Isabelle), "one can't help but look for solutions."

Her second monologue occurs, again with a fine irony, when she is acting out some strange family fantasy for Monsieur Personne, a fantasy that consists largely of verbal indecencies. This time, Isabelle imagines a weekend retreat by the sea with a close friend, with whom "there was a flowing together, without tension." It is only towards the end of this monologue, after Isabelle has imagined herself cooking dinner for her friend and has suggested that they "shack up together" (and here, the visuals cut away from the hotel room to a beautiful shot of a green countryside with blue mountains in the distance), it is only then that we hear that her friend is a woman. This dream of Isabelle's seems to express a desire to escape from the "humiliations" of heterosexual relationships (as she describes them to her sister) through a lesbian love affair. But even in her dream this solution is denied her. Her friend declines.

Isabelle's third and last monologue is really in two parts, the first again a dream and the second a recognition. She is preparing herself for the "orgy" with the fat, capitalistic boss who has power over everyone and finally over language. Initially she is running through a

list of the failure of heroes—whether Al Capone, Che Guevara, Malcolm X or whoever. They are all lumped together in this desperate recitation and are all seen as part of the same con, as part of the same "fairy-tale to keep the game going. . . . Each man tries to hang on and be lucky," her voice continues. "All the rest is bullshit." But then, after the fat boss has organized his assembly-line sex, rehearsing first the visuals and then the sound (thereby suggesting an equation between his own activities and those of a film-maker), Isabelle looks at him with insight and with what might be called a terrible compassion. "I was looking at that ivory face," she says, "and I saw it was filled with dark pride, with wild strength." Then, as she is applying lipstick to his flaccid mouth, she continues by describing the face as filled as well "with abject terror and with a terminal despair—*un désespoir immense et sans remède.*"

While Isabelle is performing her mechanical actions, a vase full of flowers dominates her image on the screen. In this way, nature is once again contrasted with industry, with the fragmentation of assembly-line sex. No one is dealing with the whole of another person, only with a part—like the Ford assembly-line sequence in *British Sounds*. This fragmentation is what makes everything so desperate and without solution. And as we can detect from the dialogue that there is another woman on the floor whom we never see, and as we notice the boss's face reflected through twin images in his window to the side of his desk, Godard once again asks us to consider the relationship of sound to image, of the reflection to the object, and of the cinematic to the real.

The "kinky" sex that dominates this film is all part of this fragmentation. Again and again, the film depicts an absence of wholeness. Denise's friend in the country who manages an industrialized farm enjoys anal licks from sadly carrelled cows. Paul's incestuous feelings for his daughter, his desire "to feel her tits or fuck her up the ass," is the result (it seems to me) of the absence of continual, touching contact that one might enjoy within a real family that lives together and shares together. When affective flow is blocked, one reifies the parts.

The divisiveness in this film is the result of a technologized civilization, managed by banks, that has gone out of control. At the



cinema one evening, an angry father, his child all wrapped around his shoulders, rages at the cashier because the film has lost its sound. The projectionist has gone home, expecting the automated technology to do his job for him.

Across the street by a lamp-post, a young woman wants to go to the movies so she can be finger-fucked by her boyfriend. He seems indifferent, both to the cinema and to her. Meanwhile, he is reading a magazine called





À Suivre—to be continued.

An actual family appears in this film, but only parenthetically, like an echo from the past. Once they all appear, absurdly, at a corner in a field as Denise cycles past them. Later on they appear, equally absurdly, on a bench on a balcony, with Paul sitting next to them. The mother is always holding her two children, their arms wrapped around her, while the father plays his accordion, creating “music” by the skill of his own hands. If this family seems to come from the past, as part of Swiss folklore, there are two other moments in the film that suggest affirmation. One moment recognizes, the other analyzes.

The recognitional moment occurs towards the end of the film. Denise and Isabelle are sitting in a car, talking about love and their problems with men. It is one of the warmest exchanges that occur in this film, suggesting the strong bonding that can now exist between women. Denise notices an inscription that Isabelle has pasted up in her car. “Don’t forget,” Denise reads aloud, “a carrot shivers before the knife, salad screams when it is torn, and cabbage cries when it is boiled.”¹³ All nature should be acknowledged, all living things. But this, of course, is what so many other moments in the film deny.

The analytical moment occurs earlier in the

film. It concerns the same theme. It is also spoken by a woman, by a young woman who not only has access to childhood but who is still a child—the sullen Cecile.

She is writing an essay which she reads aloud to her father about the migration of blackbirds. It is a beautiful story, too long to quote in detail; but it suggests a totally “imaginative” interpretation of history. During the last two hundred years, Cecile’s essays explains, more terrifying than all the imperialistic conquests, all the violence, all the systematic genocide is the fact that blackbirds have left their natural home in the forests to become city birds. Cecile reads her essay but can’t think of an ending. Her mother refuses to help her—“I don’t feel like having ideas today”—so Paul comes in and finishes it: “No one dares interpret the last two hundred years of history in terms of the invasion of the cities of man by the blackbird.” He then offers a wan smile as he puffs on his cigar. For this one moment in the film, he looks pleased with himself.

Through the way it is presented, in a little parenthesis, this moment in the film is received as funny. But it is followed by hostility: Cecile wants her presents, Colette wants her cheque. This story really provides the moral center of the film, *decentered* though it be in terms of the film’s narrative. As this migration began

in England (according to Cecile) and then spread all over Europe, it obviously directly relates to the industrial revolution. The blackbirds might well be blackbirds, creatures of nature; but they might also suggest the men who left their farms in the country for the factories in the cities. The two women in the film (who have less fear and more imagination) both want to leave the city for the country, and it is another young woman who tells this story. Thus, whatever our reading, there is an implied opposition between the more "natural" values of women and the unnatural "work" values of men.

But as Peter Wollen pointed out a good many years ago, in films by Godard there is never a simple schema. Ideas, even characters, criss-cross one another and contest each other's values.⁴ Denise too, at certain moments in the film, seems very much concerned with her work—more so than Paul; and if men are linked to the city, through the references to *Le Camion* the trucks that pass are linked to the work of Marguerite Duras. As Paul explains to that class (all in darkness) at which Duras refuses to appear, "everytime you see a truck passing, think about her film—*que c'est une parole d'une femme qui passe*."

Thus, conflicting values exist in this film and they are not all nihilistic. If moments in the film can indeed be experienced as "funny," the jokes are always desperate. They are aimed at the apparently unchangeable world of advanced technology. It is as if we are being invited to laugh at a vision of the end of the world.

Like other Godard films but this time even more so, *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* resists linear exegesis. Godard himself, employing a kind of visual italics, freezes his images to heighten our perception of certain moments in his film; if we ourselves slow it down even further (through repeated screenings or through a viewing on a table), each moment in the film seems simultaneously centrifugal and centripetal, referring outwards to the rest of the film and yet requiring the context of the whole to give meaning to the part. If the film contains a search for "passion," three times in the film that word is denied when used by another person. If passion still exists, apparently it can't be shared.

As always with Godard, we return again to

paradox, to the insistent feeling of absence, to the ubiquitous presence of lack. Yet *Sauve qui peut* is so intricately structured that it limits easy access to the voice of its own creator. It affirms in parentheses. In this way, it is very different from *Numéro Deux*. *Numéro Deux* situated Godard himself within the problematic of the film both through his self-dismemberment at the opening (his head separated from the rest of his body and isolated on a tiny television screen) and through his powerlessness at the end, his head on his arms, his hands clutching the switches of his sound-mixing machine. But if in *Numéro Deux*, the hopeless hands can nevertheless bring up the sounds of music and birds that supply a tiny note of aural affirmation for the end of this film, so in *Sauve qui peut* bird sounds and music repeatedly suggest other values struggling to get through. And if the three main intertitles of this film—Imagination, Fear, and Commerce—are linked (though again with crisscrossing) to the three main characters, so the last intertitle, Music, is linked to the entire film.

Music has always been crucial to the films of Godard, but it has been very little talked about. Partly, it is very difficult to turn music into words. Arguably, music is the least ideological of all the arts. It speaks beyond the socialized falsifications of language. It is an intricate signifying system with no describable signified. In Hollywood, background music has traditionally played a purely affective role, often creating in the audience an emotion that is dramatically not fully present on the screen. Godard's use of music, however, has always (like Bresson's) been more dialectical. For instance, in both *Une Femme mariée* and in *Deux ou trois choses*, the bits of Beethoven suggest a value system, derived from the past, of which the characters are no longer a part. And in *Pierrot le fou* music seems intended to express the inexpressible, to suggest an interiority that really can't be shared.

However, in *Deux ou trois choses*, when Godard relinquished the bits and pieces of traditional culture that so haunted his mind and in *Masculin-Feminin*, when he gave up his own search for romantic love, music slipped away from his films. During the Dziga-Vertov period with Jean-Pierre Gorin, he addressed himself to a more directly political type of cinematic practice and music scarcely appeared



at all. Yet by the time he made *Numéro Deux* (now, as in *Sauve qui peut*, working with Anne-Marie Miéville), music is back again and is described at one point in the film as that which allows one “to see the incredible.” In *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, there are a number of musical themes, only a few of which I have referred to, each one of which seems to suggest different values and they finally combine in intricate yet indescribable ways.

If the music begins in the sky, it ends on the ground. If at the first, it seems to come from the heavens, it is diegetically “placed” by the string orchestra in the street past which Colette and Cecile walk during the final sequence in the film. And if Godard’s privileged women also are able to hear it, this film has not been directed but “composed” by Jean-Luc Godard! For Godard, music obviously represents some values that he can neither show nor name.

By these comments, I don’t mean to re-bourgeoisify Godard. His is still one of the most radical cinematic practices that we have on the screen. Except, for this film, Godard has had to pretend that it is not.

Godard has always possessed a splintered audience. Many people who like his early work reject the Dziga-Vertov period, while many people who applaud the Dziga-Vertov films deplore his earlier work and have denounced both *Numéro Deux* and *Sauve qui peut* as a

return to personalism.

But Godard has never been any one thing. If the Dziga-Vertov period was crucial for Godard in his attempt to find a more than personal solution to the problems of life (as Paul was unable to in *Masculin-Feminin*), neither *Vent d’est* nor *Lotte in Italia* (the most challenging of these filmic essays) changed the habits of film-goers. Nor did they change the political map of the world.

As a film-maker, Godard is the sum product of all the films he has made, from his earliest shorts to this latest feature film. And to make films, you need a story, you need stars, and you need money (as Godard and Gorin declared at the opening of *Tout va bien*). Finally, however, you also need an audience. You need to be *received*. You have to be looked at. You have to be heard.

If, in *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, Godard has fooled some audiences into thinking he has made a beautiful film or a funny film, this was his compromise with his need for survival. And those more severe critics who have called the film’s references to incest and anal sex disgusting are committing the same conceptual error that Godard’s cinema has always challenged: they are assuming a one-to-one relationship between image and referent, between illusion and the real.

The scene with the capitalist boss is not just any orgy. It provides a paradigm for the frag-

mented, fractionalized, subservient, dehumanized, and depersonalized nature of the film industry, of the nature of most work today and, increasingly, of the nature of the world. It is a game controlled by commerce in which human beings are simply pawns. As radical a denunciation as anything we might find in *Vent d'est*, the film is neither a sell-out nor a celebration. It is Godard's intelligent yet painful view of the world.

Sauve qui peut (la vie) has still to receive an adequate reading. Working inductively from some of the more obvious details in the film, I have simply tried to suggest that the film is both more interesting and ultimately more radical than it may seem. It is a film that has been shaped to fit into the cinema Machine—that whole network of production, promotion, and exhibition which determines, more and more, what films get made and then which of those get seen. The anecdotal surface of the film is largely a ruse, as if to please or titillate the lumpen-bourgeoisie. Like fables from ancient times, like Aesop and La Fontaine, the true "moral" of *Sauve qui peut* has been cunningly encoded, decipherable only by the very few who really care, by what is left (I guess) of the *cinéphile élite*.

The above account, however, can claim to be only a partial decoding. For there are obviously other things that need to be said. Godard still lives. It is the cinema that is dead—the cinema as we used to know it. How can that relationship manage to continue?

NOTES

1. Quoted in *The Ancien Régime*, by C.B.A. Behrens (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967).
2. The many "Buñuelian" moments in this film, particularly the string orchestra in the street at the end, may be partly the result of the role that Jean-Claude Carrière played in writing the script for this film. He has several times worked with Buñuel.
3. This citation is ascribed in the film to Angelo Napoli, 15 October 1979. While he is supposedly a friend of Isabelle, the precision of this naming and dating might suggest a living person, although I have been unable to find out if this is so.
4. See Lee Russell (alias Peter Wollen), "Jean-Luc Godard—a reply to Robin Wood," in *New Left Review* (London), No. 39, 1966.

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